

AT RAVENHOLME JUNCTION.

“**W**ERE you ever out in a more wretched night in your life?” asked Harry Luscombe in a tone of disgust, as we were trudging wearily along after a full half-hour of absolute silence.

The rain was certainly coming down “with a vengeance,” as people say. We had been out all day fishing in some private waters about ten miles from home. A friend had given us a lift in his trap the greater part of the way in going, and we had arranged to walk back, never dreaming that the sunny day would resolve itself into so wet an evening. Fortunately, each of us had taken a light mackintosh, and we had on our thick fishing-boots, otherwise our plight would have been much worse than it was.

“Wretched night!” again ejaculated Harry, whose pipe the rain would persist in putting out.

“But surely we cannot be far from the Grange now?” I groaned.

“A good four miles yet, old fellow,” answered my friend. “We must grin and bear it.”

For ten more minutes we paced the slushy road in moist silence.

“I wouldn’t have cared so much,” growled Harry at last, “if we had only a decent lot of fish to take home. Won’t Gerty and the governor chaff us in the morning!”

I winced. Harry had touched a sore point. I rather prided myself on my prowess with rod and line; yet here was I, after eight hours’ patient flogging of the water, going back to the Grange with a creel that I should blush to open when I got there. It was most annoying.

By-and-by we came to a stile, crossing which we found a footpath through the meadows, just faintly visible in the dark. The footpath, in time, brought us to a level crossing over the railway. But instead of crossing the iron road to the fields beyond, as I expected he would do, Harry turned half round and began to walk along the line. “Where on earth are you leading me to?” I asked, as I stumbled and barked my shins over a heap of loose sleepers by the side of the rails, “Seest thou not yonder planets that flame so brightly in the midnight sky?” he exclaimed, pointing to two railway signals clearly visible some quarter of a mile away. “Thither are we bound. Disturb not the meditations of a great mind by further foolish questionings.”

I was too damp to retort as I might otherwise have done, so I held my peace and stumbled quietly after him. Little by little we drew nearer to the signal lamps, till at last we stood close under them. They

shone far and high above our heads, being, in fact, the crowning points of two tall semaphore posts. But we were not going quite so far skyward as the lamps, our destination being the signalman's wooden hut from which the semaphores were worked. This of itself stood some distance above the ground, being built on substantial posts driven firmly into the embankment. It was reached by a flight of wooden steps, steep and narrow. We saw by the light shining from its windows that it was not without an occupant. Harry put a couple of fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly. "Jim Crump," he shouted, "Jim Crump—hi! Where are you?"

"Is that you, Mr. Harry?" said a voice, and then the door above us was opened. "Wait a moment, sir, till I get my lantern. The steps are slippery with the rain, and one of them is broken."

"You see, my governor is one of the managing directors of this line," said Harry, in explanation, while we were waiting for the lantern, "so that I can come and go, and do pretty much as I like about here."

"But why have you come here at all?" I asked.

"For the sake of a rest and a smoke, and a talk with Jim Crump about his dogs."

Two minutes later and we had mounted the steps, and for the first time in my life I found myself in a signalman's box.

It was a snug little place enough, but there was not much room to spare. There were windows on three sides it, so that the man on duty might have a clear view both up and down the line. Five or six long iron levers were fixed in a row below the front window. The due and proper manipulation of these levers, which were connected by means of rods and chains with the points and signals outside, and the working of the simple telegraphic apparatus which placed him en rapport with the stations nearest to him, up and down, were the signalman's sole but onerous duties. Both the box and the lamps overhead were lighted with gas brought from the town, two miles away.

"I have been wanting to see you for the last two or three weeks, Mr. Harry," said Crump, a well-built man of thirty, with clear resolute eyes and a firm-set mouth.

"Ay, ay. What's the game now, Crump? Got some more of that famous tobacco?"

"Something better than the tobacco, Mr. Harry. I've got a bull terrier pup for you. Such a beauty!"

"The dickens you have!" cried Harry, his eyes all a-sparkle with delight. "Crump, you are a brick. A bull terrier pup is the very thing I've been hankering after for the last three months. Have you got it here?"

"No, it's at home. You see, I didn't know that you were coming to-night."

Harry's countenance fell. "That's a pity now, isn't it?"

"It don't rain near so fast as it did," said Crump, "and if you would like to take the pup with you, I'll just run home and fetch it. I can go there and back in twenty minutes. It's agen the rules to leave my box, I know, and I wouldn't leave it for anybody but you; and not even for you, Mr. Harry, if I didn't know that you knew how to work the levers and the telly a'most as well as I do myself. Besides all that, there will be nothing either up or down till twelve thirty. What say you, sir?"

"I say go by all means, Crump. You may depend on my looking well after the signals while you are away."

"Right you are, sir." And Crump proceeded to pull on his overcoat.

"I wish I could make you more comfortable, sir," said Crump to me. "But this is only a roughish place."

Harry and I sat down on a sort of bunk or locker at the back of the box. Harry produced his flask, which he had filled with brandy before leaving the hotel. Crump declined any of the proffered spirit, but accepted a cigar. Then he pulled up the collar of his coat and went. In the pauses of our talk we could hear the moaning of the telegraph wires outside as the invisible fingers of the wind touched them in passing.

"This is Ravenholme Junction," said Harry to me.

"Is it, indeed? Much obliged for the information," I answered drily.

"About two years ago a terrible accident happened close to this spot. No doubt you read about it at the time."

"Possibly so. But if I did, the facts have escaped my memory."

"The news was brought to the Grange, and I was on the spot in less than three hours after the smash. I shall never forget what I saw that night." He smoked in grave silence for a little while, and then he spoke again. "I don't know whether you are acquainted with the railway geography of this district, but Ravenholme—I am speaking of the village, which is nearly two miles away—is on a branch line, which diverges from the main line some six miles north of this box, and after zigzagging among various busy townships and hamlets, joins the main line again about a dozen miles south of the point where it diverged; thus forming what is known as the Ravenholme Loop Line. None of the main line trains run over the loop: Passengers from it going to any place on the main line have to change from the local trains at either the north or south junction, according to the direction they intend to travel."

I wondered why he was telling this.

"You will understand from this that the junction where we are now is rather an out-of-the-way spot—out of the way, that is, of any great

bustle of railway traffic. It forms, in fact, the point of connection between the Ravenholme Loop and a single line of rails which turns off to the left about a hundred yards from here, and gives access to a cluster of important collieries belonging to Lord Exbrooke ; and the duty of Crump is, by means of his signals, to guard against the possibility of a collision between the coal trains coming off the colliery line and the ordinary trains passing up and down the loop. You will readily comprehend that, at a quiet place like this, a signalman has not half the work to do, nor half the responsibility to labour under, of a man in a similar position at some busy junction on the main line. In fact, a signalman at Ravenholme Junction may emphatically be said to have an easy time of it."

I nodded.

"Some two years ago, however, it so fell out that an abutment of one of the bridges on the main line was so undermined by heavy floods that instructions had to be given for no more trains to pass over it till it had been thoroughly repaired. In order to prevent any interruption of traffic, it was decided that till the necessary repairs could be effected all main line trains should work, for the time being, over the Ravenholme Loop. As it was arranged so it was carried out."

"Well?"

"The signalman at that time in charge of this box was named Dazeley—a shy, nervous sort of man, as I have been told, lacking in self-confidence, and not to be depended upon in any unforeseen emergency. Such as he was, however, he had been at Ravenholme for three years, and had always performed the duties of his situation faithfully and well. As soon as the main line trains began to travel by the new route, another man was sent from head-quarters to assist Dazeley—there had been no night-work previously. The men came on duty turn and turn about, twelve hours on and twelve hours off, the man who was on by day one week being on by night the following week."

"Go on."

"It is said that Dazeley soon began to look worn and depressed, and that he became more nervous and wanting in self-confidence than ever. Be that as it may, he never spoke a complaining word to anyone, but went on doing his duty in the silent depressed way habitual with him. One morning when he was coming off duty—it was his turn for night-work that week—his mate was taken suddenly ill and was obliged to go home again. There was no help for it: Dazeley was obliged to take the sick man's place for the day. When evening came round, his mate sent word that he was somewhat better, but not well enough to resume work before morning ; so Dazeley had to take his third consecutive 'spell' of twelve hours in the box. You see, Ravenholme is a long way from head-quarters, and in any case it would have taken some time to get assistance ; besides which, Dazeley expected

that a few hours at the very most would see his mate thoroughly recovered. So nothing was said or done."

I was growing interested.

"The night mail from south to north was timed to pass Ravenholme Junction, without stopping, at 11.40. On the particular night to which we now come—the night of the accident—it is supposed that poor Dazeley, utterly worn out for want of rest, had lain down for a minute or two on this very bunk, and had there dropped off to sleep, his signals, as was usual at that hour, standing at "all clear." Had he remained asleep till after the mail had passed all would have been well, everything being clear for its safe transit past the junction; but unfortunately the night was somewhat foggy, and the engine-driver, not being able to see the lamps at the usual distance, blew his whistle loudly. Roused by the shrill summons, Dazeley, as it is supposed, started suddenly to his feet, and his brain being still muddled with sleep, he grasped one of the familiar levers, and all unconscious of what he was doing, he turned the mail train on to the single line that led to the collieries."

"Oh!"

"The consequences were terrible. Some two or three hundred yards down the colliery line a long coal train was waiting for the mail to pass before proceeding on its journey. Into this train the mail dashed at headlong speed. Two people were killed on the spot, and twenty or thirty more or less hurt."

"How dreadful!"

"When they came to look for Dazeley he was not to be found. Horror-stricken at the terrible consequences of his act, he had fled. A warrant for his arrest was obtained. He was found four days afterwards in a wood, hanging to the bough of a tree, dead. One of his hands clasped a scrap of paper on which a few half-illegible words had been scrawled, the purport of which was that after what had happened he could no longer bear to live."

"A sad story, truly," I said, as Harry finished. "It seems to me that the poor fellow was to be pitied more than blamed."

"Crump's twenty minutes are rather long ones," said Harry, as he looked at his watch. "It is now thirty-eight minutes past eleven. No chance of getting home till long after midnight."

The rain was over and the wind had gone with it. Not a sound was audible save now and again the faint moaning of the telegraph wires overhead. Harry crossed to the window and opened one of the three casements. "A breath of fresh air will be welcome," he said. "The gas makes this little place unbearable." Having opened the window he came back again and sat down beside me on the bunk.

Hardly had Harry resumed his seat, when all at once the gas sank down as though it were going out, but next moment it was burning

as brightly as before. An icy shiver ran through me from head to foot. I turned my head to glance at Harry, and as I did so I saw, to my horror, that we were no longer alone. There had been but two of us only a moment before: the door had not been opened, yet now we were three. Sitting on a low wooden chair close to the levers, and with his head resting on them, was a stranger, to all appearance fast asleep!

I never before experienced the feeling of awful dread that crept over me at that moment, and I hope never to do so again. I knew instinctively that the figure before me was no corporeal being, no creature of flesh and blood like ourselves. My heart seemed to contract, my blood to congeal: my hands and feet turned cold as ice: the roots of my hair were stirred with a creeping horror that I had no power to control. I could not move my eyes from that sleeping figure. It was Dazeley come back again: a worn, haggard-looking man, restless, and full of nervous twitchings even in his sleep.

"Listen!" said Harry, almost inaudibly, to me. I wanted to look at him, I wanted to see whether he was affected in the same way that I was, but for the life of me I could not turn my eyes away from that sleeping phantom.

Listening as he bade me, I could just distinguish the first low dull murmur made by an on-coming train while it is still a mile or more away. It was a murmur that grew and deepened with every second, swelling gradually into the hoarse inarticulate roar of an express train coming towards us at full speed. Suddenly the whistle sounded its loud, shrill, imperative summons. For one moment I tore my eyes away from the sleeping figure. Yonder, a quarter, or it might be half a mile away, but being borne towards us in a wild rush of headlong fury, was plainly visible the glowing Cyclopean eye of the coming train. Still the whistle sounded, painful, intense—agonised, one might almost fancy.

Louder and louder grew the heavy thunderous beat of the train. It was close upon us now. Suddenly the sleeping figure started to its feet—pressed its hands to its head for a moment as though lost in doubt—gave one wild, frenzied glance round—and then seizing one of the levers with both hands, pulled it back and there held it.

A sudden flash—a louder roar—and the phantom train had passed us and was plunging headlong into the darkness beyond. The figure let go its hold of the lever, which fell back to its original position. As it did so, a dreadful knowledge seemed all at once to dawn on its face. Surprise, horror, anguish unspeakable—all were plainly depicted on the white, drawn features of the phantom before me. Suddenly it flung up its arms as if in wild appeal to Heaven, then sank cowering on its knees, and buried its face in both its hands with an expression of misery the most profound.

Next moment the gas gave a flicker as though it were going out, and

when I looked again Harry and I were alone. The phantom of the unhappy signalman had vanished: the noise of the phantom train had faded into silence. No sound was audible save the unceasing monotone of the electric wires above us. Harry was the first to break the spell.

"To-day is the eighth of September," he said, "and it was on the eighth of September, two years ago, that the accident happened. I had forgotten the date till this moment."

At this instant the door opened, and in came Jim Crump with the puppy under his arm. Struck with something in our faces he looked from one to the other of us, and did not speak for a few seconds. "Here be the pup, sir," he said at last, "and a reg'lar little beauty I call her."

"Was it not two years ago this very night that the accident took place?" asked Harry, as he took the puppy out of Crump's arms into his own.

Crump reflected for a few moments. "Yes, sir, that it was, though I'd forgotten it. It was on the eighth of September. I ought to know, because it was on that very night my youngster was born."

"Were you signalman here on the eighth of September last year—the year after the accident?"

"No, sir, a man of the name of Moffat was here then. I came on the twentieth of September. Moffat was ordered to be moved. They said he had gone a little bit queer in his head. He went about saying that Dazeley's ghost had shown itself to him in this very box, and that he saw and heard a train come past that wasn't a train, and I don't know what bosh; so it was thought best to remove him."

"We thought just now—my friend and I—that we heard a train coming," said Harry as he gently stroked the puppy. "Did you hear anything as you came along?"

"Nothing whatever, sir. Had a train been coming I must have heard it, because I walked from my house up the line. Besides, there's no train due yet for some time."

Harry glanced at me. He was evidently not minded to enlighten Crump as to anything we had seen or heard.

Five minutes later we left, carrying the dog with us. Whether or not Harry said anything to his father I don't know. This, however, I do know, that within six months from that time certain alterations were made on the line which necessitated the removal of the signalman's box at Ravenholme Junction to a point half a mile further south. But I have never visited it since that memorable night.